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Appropriations Committee
CT General Assembly
210 Capitol Ave
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Appropriations Committee,

Distinguished Co-Chairs – Senator Osten & Representative Walker, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Heather Evans and I live in Mansfield Center, CT. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 6439, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor. **I respectfully request the legislature increase funding by \$461 Million over five years for community nonprofits.**

I am a nurse with a Doctorate degree and I'm also pursuing a post-Master's Certificate so that I can serve my community as a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP). For more than 20 years, I have served vulnerable populations and I look forward to expanding my role so that I can serve people with mental health concerns. I am fortunate because I am currently finishing my clinical hours at Perception Programs, Inc (PPI). This non-profit organization serves some of the most vulnerable people in our community. We provide mental health services to people newly released from incarceration, people with acute or chronic substance abuse disorders, people with chronic, complicated mental illnesses, and even children/adolescents with mental health concerns. As a PMHNP student, I am learning more than I ever expected at PPI.

In addition to learning the skills required to care for our clients, I am also learning about the limitations we face in providing care. We make do with as little as possible. I'd consider the office a "no-frills" environment, as money is reserved for the provision of services instead of being used to provide extravagant and unnecessary equipment or furniture. Despite the focus on frugality, we still have a waiting list for clients who desperately want and need mental health services. It is not uncommon for mental health clients, state-wide, to wait weeks or months to get an initial appointment for therapy or medication management. This wait is especially difficult for children and adolescents who are seeking mental health services. Connecticut, like most of the United States, lacks adequate accessibility to mental health services, especially in rural or underserved communities.

Access to mental health services for children and adolescents is especially lacking. Mental health services for children and adolescents was already limited in CT but the pandemic has increased demand due to the added stress that has been placed on children and families. I am happy to see that some focus is being placed on this important issue, with bills such as HB 5001, which would allow for limited licensure reciprocity for out-of-state professionals and other efforts aimed at increasing staffing for mental health organizations. However, without increased funding for non-profits, these efforts will fall flat.

While obtaining my clinical experiences for my PMHNP education, I've noticed that clinicians, physicians, Nurse Practitioners, and staff often start begin their careers by working in non-profit mental health organizations. They have the best intentions of serving their community and the most underserved clients. However, they often change employment agencies after a year or two, moving toward providing care to less vulnerable clients in for-profit institutions. With the exorbitant cost of higher education and the increasing cost of living, mental health professionals are often faced with the difficult decision of continuing to work for non-profit agencies or moving to a position where they would earn increased wages in a for-profit organization. This turn-over in staff negatively affects the patients and the other mental health professionals who remain at the non-profit organization.

I strongly encourage that the Appropriations Committee will support the requested \$461 million increase so that our non-profit services can continue to support our community. Without this increased funding, non-profit agencies providing mental health services will not be able to attract or maintain the staff and clinicians necessary to support and expand care to our patients.

Respectfully,

Heather Evans, PhD, RNC-MNN, CLC (PMHNP Intern)